
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 15-05

Kelsey Temple Church of God in Christ

1435-37 Park Road NW
Square 2676, Lot 0813

Meeting Date: April 28, 2016
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC: 1A
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate Kelsey Temple Church of God in Christ, 1435-1437 Park Road NW, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

Architectural and Historical background

The Kelsey Temple Church of God in Christ is a brownish-red brick, temple-fronted church building constructed in 1921-22 as the Columbia Heights Christian Church. The building is located on the north side of Park Road just west of 14th Street and is an architecturally monumental, yet neighborhood-scaled building that transitions well between the commercial and residential buildings along this block of Park Road. The church was built during a period of intense growth in Columbia Heights illustrating the trend that as new residents moved into neighborhoods, places of worship catering to the communities arose with them. Within five years of construction of the Columbia Heights Christian Church, five other churches were constructed in the immediate area.



The Columbia Heights Christian Church building is the second church on the site. The church, which grew out of the 19th-century Christian Church movement, was established in Columbia Heights in 1916. In 1918, it purchased the Park Road site where it erected a temporary chapel before building the present basilican-plan edifice in 1921-22. Executed in a Neo-Classical style, the church was designed by architect Maurice Russel Rhoades from Chambersburg, PA and is characterized by its raised base, and its front pediment with grand Order columns and cornice of cast stone. The building features vividly colored stained glass windows, currently protected behind translucent plastic covers. According to the nomination, Rhoades designed many notable buildings in Chambersburg, PA including churches, institutional and government buildings, but no buildings other than this church in D.C. It is unclear how Rhoades came to be hired to design the Columbia Heights Christian Church, but further research might provide relevant information.

The Columbia Heights Christian Church served the community for three decades until 1958. As the demographics of the neighborhood changed, the church sold its building to the First Church of God in Christ and moved to Chevy Chase.

While the demographic shift of the neighborhood encouraged the departure of the Columbia Heights Christian Church, it also encouraged the arrival of the First Church of God in Christ. This church, later named Temple Church of God in Christ, and later (1993) Kelsey Temple Church of God, was officially organized in 1923 with 35 members. Over the next three decades, the church expanded and moved from Southwest to Northwest and then back to Southwest where it thrived under the leadership of Pastor Samuel Kelsey. During the 1940s, the church grew by hundreds of members and expanded to include six Church of Christ in God congregations all led by Pastor Kelsey who by then had been named "Bishop." In 1943, Bishop Kelsey began to broadcast his services on the radio, reaching a much larger audience. At the same time, the church gained notoriety for its choir which, during the 1940s, made a number of records.

During the 1940s and early 1950s, as racial segregation continued and racial hostilities intensified, members of the church and community encouraged Bishop Kelsey to get more actively involved in racial issues. Kelsey heeded the call, ultimately becoming an active member in the Civil Rights Movement in this city.

In 1957, the Redevelopment Land Agency purchased the Temple Church building in Southwest under the threat of eminent domain as part of its redevelopment of Southwest. Shortly thereafter, the Temple Church acquired the church in Columbia Heights, and in January 1958, Bishop Kelsey led a motorcade from Southwest to Park Road NW, where more than 700 people attended the first morning worship service. At its new location in Columbia Heights, the church continued its commitment to the Civil Rights Movement, with Bishop Kelsey often crossing racial and denominational lines in the process. Kelsey preached in collaboration with white ministers at various locations in the city; and, after hearing Martin Luther King, Jr., Kelsey began to "share his pulpit with those with political aspirations and other agents of change," according to the nomination. Kelsey was a member of the One Hundred Ministries, a group of ministers influential in ministry and politics; he was a member of the Opportunities Industrialization Center, a black self-help organization that trained young people in the trades

and assisted them in finding employment; and he was a lifetime member of the NAACP, the Urban League and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Immediately after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the riots that followed, Kelsey kept the doors to his church open and continued to hold services. Kelsey apparently welcomed all persons, no matter what race or religion, inviting everyone inside to safety. In the aftermath of the riots and in the years that followed, Kelsey was committed to staying in and rebuilding the devastated community. The Outreach Ministry of the church expanded into the community, providing hot meals, free clothing, street ministry, daily meals and more. The church became the center of community activities and provided space for political and civic events and activities.

After Bishop Kelsey's death in 1989, the church was re-named Kelsey Temple Church of God in Christ in honor of his 70-year ministry.

Evaluation

The Kelsey Temple Church of God in Christ meets D.C. Designation Criteria A and B (Events and History) and National Register Criterion A primarily for its associations with the growth of the Church of God in Christ in D.C., and for the role that the pastor and congregation played in the Civil Rights Movement in the District. The church began and operated programs that catered to a community in need during a time of racial, political, social and economic strife in the years following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. For these historical reasons, the church meets National Register Criterion Consideration A—that is, it is a religious property that derives its primary significance from its historical importance.

The nomination further concludes that the property meets D.C. Designation Criterion C and National Register Criterion B for its association with Bishop Samuel Kelsey who as a lifelong minister of the church, played a critical role in the Civil Rights Movement and in the church's community outreach ministry, and who, according to the nomination was a "locally and nationally influential civic and religious leader." Staff feels that more substantive biographical and contextual information on Kelsey would be necessary to support such a claim at the National Register level. The National Register Bulletin 15 notes that Criterion B is generally restricted to those properties that illustrate rather than commemorate a person's important achievements. One could argue that the naming of the church for Bishop Kelsey was done for commemorative reasons and the building itself is not the best illustration of Kelsey's role, beyond that of being minister of the church, as a civic leader. If the nomination is to be forwarded to the National Register under Criterion B, staff recommends that additional research be conducted and a better context developed for understanding Kelsey and his role in the Civil Rights Movement in comparison to others in similar roles during the same period.

The church retains a high degree of integrity. The only notable alteration is the covering of the stained glass windows by translucent plastic. These covers, however, are reversible and may be replaced some day with a newer material that may allow the vivid quality of the stained glass windows to read through to the outside. The Period of Significance for the building extends from 1921-22, the date of construction of the building, to 1989, and the death of Bishop Kelsey.